

**Statement by the Sonja Haynes Stone Center on the
“Tarred Healing: Sites/Sights of Remembrance” Exhibition
24 February 2022**

The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Research in Black Cultures and Histories core mission is to “support the critical examination of all dimensions of African American and African diaspora cultures ... “

Holding together the imperatives of reckoning with, honoring, and celebrating Black history is our core purpose. It is the reason for our existence. Sometimes that work is difficult, but it is rewarding, and we are proud to do it.

We are dedicated to facilitating exploration of and engagement with the Black experience wherever we can: in advancing teaching and research about the Black experience; in engaging our community, and in supporting the arts and artists.

The Stone Center and the Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum have been fortunate since opening in the Fall of 2004 to have welcomed over 29 Visiting Artists who’ve helped us to explore and celebrate the lives, cultures and histories of people of African descent. The exhibitions mounted in the Gallery made it possible for us to collaborate with award winning artists and scholars and serve as the site for the development of shows that traveled to other institutions across the United States. Many of those artists remain close to the Stone Center and continue to work with us on projects here and in other parts of the U.S.

One of those artists, who wanted to express appreciation for our past collaborations, decided to fund the fellowship for Cornell Watson, a gifted photographer we invited to the Stone Center in the Fall of 2020. As with many of the other artists we welcome here, we sat through a number of planning meetings to describe the theme and direction we wanted for the show. Throughout those meetings we stated, directly, that we were interested in highlighting places and moments on this campus that were sites of memory, reverence and deep historical significance for the University’s African American Community, the surrounding Chapel Hill community, and by extension, the University community at large.

We took time with Mr. Watson to identify and take him to sites that we wanted to highlight because of their historical significance. But we also emphasized that we also saw these sites as material reminders of a past that has only recently been brought into full relief by descendants, seeking to take back stories that had been hidden or denied, and by researchers who invested thousands of hours uncovering the documentary materials needed to create and correct the record of the University’s shameful treatment of African Americans over the years.

We here at the Stone Center felt, however, that although a great deal was being done to research and uncover significant sites on campus and in and around Chapel Hill, very little had been done to afford those descendants, for whom those sites are sacred, an opportunity to sacralize them. And, to give the various communities who’d urged and supported the various

processes of 'reckoning' on campus and in the community, the same opportunity to honor those sites and the people whose lives are deeply invested in those sites. That was the focus for this exhibition and those were the lives, both departed and still with us, that we wanted to celebrate with this exhibition and that is what was conveyed to Mr. Watson at every step of this process.

There were, as is normal with these kinds of collaborations, some disagreements over content and scope how the story would be told, but we were clear and insistent on focusing on the lives of people who were still here and still connected to sites of remembrance. We chose a set of remarkably beautiful and evocative photographs from the selection he presented that captured the depth and meaning we'd hoped to achieve with this show. It would almost be more appropriate to say those prints were breathtaking. There were several, however, we felt ran totally counter to what we were trying to achieve and would detract from the theme, and indeed from the atmosphere of reverence and the sacred that we wanted to create for the families and individuals pictured in the show. We remained in ongoing debate and discussion for almost one year finally reaching a compromise on what would be included in the exhibition. On February 4, Mr. Watson visited the gallery in preparation for our planned February 22 virtual opening program. He and I and two other Stone Center staff members reviewed the framed items for the show, and we asked if he'd like to make any last-minute changes. After a slight adjustment in the order of the images he was satisfied, and we planned to move forward.

On Friday, February 18, I was made aware that a photo essay, with the name of our exhibition had been printed in the Washington Post, that also included the photographs we'd said should not be a part of our show, which was to be the first public appearance for the exhibition. We were not consulted and had no prior knowledge of Mr. Watson's submission to the Post. We, of course, were taken aback by these events. Under these circumstances and given Mr. Watson's actions, that ran counter to our understandings, we felt it necessary to cancel our show. We had no assurances or indications from Mr. Watson about his intentions going forward and we could not be certain if it would be mounted again in a form or format that would run counter to our original vision, or displayed with the title we developed, which was specific to our vision.

We, of course wish the best to Mr. Watson as he goes forward. As happens so often in artistic collaboration, there were disagreements in process; but there is no disagreement around our shared purpose of foregrounding the lives and stories of Black people in our communities. We share a deep-rooted agreement – one enshrined in the mission of the Stone Center – that we should reckon with, remember, and honor the Black community's role and contribution to the University's history. We intend to continue our efforts to support talented and visionary artists who are interested in principled examinations of the lives of people of African descent.